# Public Relations, Values and Cultural Identity

Enric Ordeix,
Valérie Carayol &
Ralph Tench (eds.)

P.I.E. Peter Lang

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As organisations seek legitimacy in a fast-moving, interconnected and changing world, how do public relations help them to manage their identity, responsibilities and impact on society? In a more interactive society, organisations need to align their actions with social demands and values. If the main role of public relations is to build trust and influence opinionmakers, media, the public and the political agenda, what are the constraints and limitations at play here, and what is the impact on ethical principles?

The published research shows the profession is facing crucial changes: the existence of new organisational structures better aligned with social demands; the emergence of new techniques for interacting with organisations in a more trustworthy manner; and growing pressure by social groups acting both for and against particular social values, ideas and identities.

**Dr. Enric Ordeix** has been a member of the Communication Department of Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations – Ramon Llull University since 1995. He is a member of the research group GRECPRP, Director of the MAs in Strategic Management in Global Communication and Public Affairs and Protocol, Vice-President of the Global Communication Institute and Track Chair of the IABD, International Academy of Business Disciplines. He was the 2013 EUPRERA Congress Chair.

**Dr. Valérie Carayol** is full Professor at the Institute of Information and Communication Sciences, Bordeaux Montaigne University. She is the director of the research group MICA dedicated to communication sciences and art and the editor of the French academic journal *Communication & Organisation*, founded in 1992. She is a former President of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA).

**Dr. Ralph Tench** is full Professor of Communication Education and Director of PhD programmes for the Faculty of Business and Law at Leeds Beckett University. He is the former subject head for public relations and communications at Leeds Beckett University and is member of the EUPRERA Board of Directors.

P.I.E. Peter Lang
Brussels

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Bruxelles · Bern · Berlin · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

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The book was subject to a double blind refereeing process.

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*This book is dedicated to our dear friend and colleague*
*Adela Rogojinaru. Dr Adela was a full professor at the*
*University of Bucharest and former Board member of EUPRERA.*
*She made a valuable contribution to the Barcelona Congress as well*
*as to EUPRERA over many years. She is fondly remembered*
*for her friendship, academic contribution and professionalism.*

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# Introduction

## A New Era of Understanding for Public Relations Theory and Practice

This book is a collection of some of the best papers from 64 double blind peer reviewed submissions which were presented at the annual Congress of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) in October 3-5th, 2013. The Congress was held at the Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations of Ramon Llull University (FCCRIB-URL), in Barcelona (Catalonia-Spain) and co-organized by EUPRERA and the School's Research Group in Strategy and Creativity in Advertising and Public Relations.

Under the topic "Strategic Public Relations. Public Values and Cultural Identity" the Congress demonstrated how Public Relations is growing and maturing as a professional field in communication. In a more interactive society organisations need to align their actions with social demands and values. Public Relations' main role is to seek legitimacy to act and influence opinion makers and public, media and political agendas. Public Relations is at a crossroads as it is facing crucial changes such as: the existence of new organisational structures better aligned with contemporary social demands; the discussion of new techniques to explain and build understanding about organisations through a more trustworthy and transparent lens; the growing pressure by social groups that act as opinion leaders against and for values, ideas and identities; and the coexistence of different agendas (public, media and political) depending on the means, fields or types of publics. These are significant and deep discussions that we are engaged with as an academic, professional and practice based field.

Through these themes during the 2013 Congress 140 researchers and scholars from 86 universities and 24 countries engaged in dialogue and debate to consider new trends in Public Relations and to address cultural, national and global issues. The 64 papers presented in the Congress were organised under 5 main sub-themes: **1. Strategic Public Relations. Organisational roles and functions**, which implies, among others: New PR challenges. Strategic versus tactical PR; New opportunities. Increasing PR Strategies as a key strategy for organisational development, and Development of integrated communication strategies by agencies and consultancies. **2. Organisational policies and public values**, that included: Trends and challenges of Public Relations roles in organisations; Governances, corporate culture and social engagement, and Leadership and change management. **3. Cultural, national and global issues** with topics such as: Social analysis research and public opinion; General interest and corporate social responsibility (CSR), and national versus global brands, companies, institutions and countries. **4. Public opinion and networks, public sphere and agenda building**, involving: Value of relationships with strategic publics of organisations; Scenario building in crisis and issues management, and spin doctoring and persuasion; Speech writing and delivery. **5. Grass roots influence and community engagement**, where researchers debate on: Social media and dialogue; Public representation and opinion leadership and measurement and monitoring of communicative processes.

This book contains the best papers on these topics with a very selective and rigorous process of double blind reviewing by members of the EUPRERA Scientific Committee who filtered and selected papers for the Congress journal or for this book. Through this book, the editorial team, Dr. Enric Ordeix (Congress Organiser), Professor Dr. Valérie Carayol (EUPRERA President) and Professor Dr. Ralph Tench (Head of the Scientific Committee), aim to represent a large number of academics who were able to attend the Congress in order to promote discussion in this field. The papers have significant quality and depth as did those papers that made up the three days of discussions at the Congress. From this high level of presentation and contribution to the field it is relevant to capture within this introduction just some of the sentiments, themes, discussions and debates that were held over the important Congress period in Barcelona, 2013.

One of the main conclusions reached is that **Public Relations seek both the societal support and the legitimacy** of the organisational or corporate setting. As such the theoretical principles that help social values and the identity of many organisations to be part of the public, political and media agenda still need to be accurately identified. In fact, this is the same as researching how legitimacy, innovation, symmetric and public agenda converge when Public Relations performance is excellent. Organisations are therefore still fighting the contested terrain to gain social support in order to legitimize their messages and societal position or role.

A second theme is that the social sphere **demands procedural and critical thinking** with more grass-roots communication and a higher level of social engagement. Key opinion leaders are now crucial in order to give support and act in favour or against organisations. We realise the incoming need for Public Relations to be aware of the leadership groups' performance as opinion makers and agenda setters. Opinion making and influence have a direct connection with the companies' publics and their behaviour and, of course, online communication contributes effectively to offline activities (influencing the promotion and development of projects, dissemination, evaluation etc.).

And as a final, general statement, we **are facing a new area of understanding among organisations and society** and the papers this book contains are proof of it. We are arguably now in an era where citizens and organisations need to merge or behave more symmetrically to influence the society where mutual comprehension is an increasing expectation. It is essential to achieve societal benefits in terms of ethics and civic engagement, it is necessary for companies to make profit in a transparent and non harmful way to the wider society. Opinion leadership, through key stakeholder groups and relationships, is arguably driving companies towards the values and community representation boundary. All-in all, we notice the increasing need for companies to act as *corporate citizens* which implies a wider participation in the decision making process and by means of a wide range of strategies (for example, the creation of foundations or through public-private partnerships) to take over some of the traditional functions of the state. Not all regions and countries of Europe are at the same place on this journey nor will all of them expect to be there. Again this is a pluralism that must be recognised and accommodated within EUPRERA and also within academia and practice more broadly as well as in academic thinking and critique.

Finally we would like to express our thanks to all contributors, presenters, guests and delegates at the Barcelona Congress, particularly to Prof. Josep Rom, Director of the GRECB-FCCRIB, Ramon Llull University, as well as to the staff Cristina Feixas, Lali Mirapeix, Maria Warith and Jordi Botey and to, Virginia Villa, DPRA EUPRERA. Together you were able to help make these advancements possible in our research in Public Relations and communication and in so doing keep our area of knowledge moving forward.

Dr. Enric Ordeix, Prof. Dr. Valérie Carayol
& Prof. Dr. Ralph Tench

# PART 1

# STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS, PUBLIC VALUES, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: OVERVIEW

# From Integration to Legitimacy

## Values and Publics in Public Relations

Jorge da Silva
*Nuno, ESCS, Portugal*

João Simão
*ESCS, Portugal*

## 1. Public Relations: The Organizational Political Function

> Public Relations planners are in a privileged position in that they interact with organisational publics frequently: their job is to manage and facilitate the communication between the organisation and its publics, sometimes in conjunction with colleagues from elsewhere in the organisation. (Gregory, 2001: 39)

Public Relations provides a strategic role in the organization's core business, through its influence on the decision-making process and monitoring the environment – Public Relations practitioners must therefore be permanently aware of the knowledge, dispositions and behaviours of their publics. Therefore Public Relations is not only a product-promoting function – but it can adopt that function and Public Relations can also encourage Marketing activity. Besides that, all the legitimacy that Public Relations brings to organizations also helps to promote it (Porto Simões, 1991).

Nowadays the Public Relations function cannot only be seen as a "(…) management function which identify, establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and their publics, form whom depend their success" (Cutlip *et al.*, 1985: 4). The emphasis should be on the strategic role that Public Relations can perform, going beyond the operational role, to occupy a more central place in the organizational core business, allowing the legitimization of the organization's life in the society.

Therefore it's urgent to rethink the concept of Public Relations beyond management relations, but also the construction of that same relations and not only the process optimization from a systemic viewpoint – thus, we refer to a strategical level to allow decisions so the organization can be recognized by a larger number of people. Public Relations as a management function is something that by itself does not allow the organization's legitimacy we also need to build that legitimacy.

In Public Relations there's a management and an optimization of processes that cannot be denied because this is a part of their activity, but this does not allow us to have a comprehensive view of the discipline's entire function, because Public Relations is not limited to such management and process optimization – they are not a communication engineering, they have a political function: 'Public Relations activity is the management of the organizational's political function' (Porto Simões, 1995: 39).

Our core question is: How can Public Relations have a political role in organizations? In this article we argue that Public Relations is a political function that allows an approach by the different publics to the organizations' core, their values – the centre of the organizations.

## 2. From Values to Legitimacy: A Process of Integration

In a society there are a wide number of subsystems and organizations. Organizations are complex, dynamic, and define themselves in different temporal and spatial degrees. Part of their diversity is constituted by the various interpretations made by organizational culture. In this variety of interpretations emerge opportunities or problems for organizations. Thus, the relationship management with different publics is critical to the survival of the organization (Hagen, 2009).

An organization is linked to a system of core values, which forms the central zone of the society from which individuals are positioned and are bonded by shared or conflicting values – society itself is the system. This sharing vs. dispute originate an adaptation of different social elements, as an organization, to their contextual needs, in a dynamic logic of mutation from what is expected of their members. This centre is a key element that combines the dominant values (those which are more fundamental and sacred), and exercises a certain authority over the periphery – the periphery can be understood as the relationship of less integration that you can have with the centre.

The existence of an organization implies much more than an economic, political or territorial system, it implies the existence of certain properties which are not merely a list of groups, layers or individuals with certain characteristics. Based on the notion of society by Edward Shils (1992), we consider that this existence implies the connection of these elements with each other and the integration carried out throughout actions, functions and constitutive and central meanings to the organization. Therefore, we propose a new approach:

VALUES1

INTEGRATION • LEGITIMACY

The values that compose the centre are regulators of all the activity and the organization's existence. Thus, when the latter is contested, it's the centre that is a stake and it's up to the Public Relations to legitimize it.

'The center dominates and saturates the periphery – at least this is the goal which it aspires and which reaches to a certain extent. Society is becoming more integrated, from the center to the outside, in belief and action' (Shils, 1992: 103).

Integration can be understood as the process of the society's unification that tends to be harmonious, based on the order that exists for their members, assuming not only the annulment of conflict but also the development of solidarity, to be done by linking expectation and achievement.

We are concerned not with the enumeration or ranking but with ties or structures that constitute a society from these parts. Integration is the sum of the structural parts; is what makes the whole of society more than the arithmetic sum of their parts. The integration in the society of different components and partnerships represents conditions linked together by

1. The concept of value, while the characteristic that means how important a thing is, as Rokeach (1973) defines: 'enduring believes that specific modes of contact or and states of existence' (p. 5) multiple and complex ways. […] Each of them can be present in varying degrees of strength and effectiveness' (Shils, 1992: 119).

We can say that the relationship with the centre defines the integration of their members, since an action is involving in the terms that it's successful in approximate the centre and the periphery, i.e., to legitimize their existence. The centre is the only integral power member, because it regulates and executes the only truly integral power of organizational existence. It's through the recognized values that the constituents revise themselves in it and feel the organization as part of their own.

Thus, there's a need to communicate what an organization actually is – disappoint the expectations of an audience will inevitably make this particular audience move away from the centre – this justifies the dissatisfaction of a consumer with a product, rising to an approximation of another centre, i.e., being more tempted to choose a product from a direct competitor of this organization.

Publics are not merely contemplative, they create their own reality, choosing one organization over another. This is the foundation for the idea of Public Relations as legitimacy, approaching the publics to the centre:

> Furthermore, the Public Relations professional will be aware of the attitude towards or behaviour of the various stakeholders (or publics) in relation to the wider issues identified in the environment and towards the organisation itself (Gregory, 2001: 39).

Unlike advertising, which works as push, Public Relations act as pull, i.e. the organization does not impose their values but build a platform where these meanings are recognized as legitimate by different publics – that's the idea of attracting different publics for the centre of the organization. We argue that the organization is a social construction which inserts within a network of individuals who influence each other and are important because they directly or indirectly influence the legitimacy of the organization – from its values. Therefore organizations can take advantage of building relationships with stakeholders who have not a direct interest in the organization, taking advantage of the influence they have on the remaining public recognition, and also strengthening their business as legitimate by sharing common values.

2. The relationship established is hypothetical: it's never a real relationship, because no one is really on the periphery, since they are always with some degree of integration in the organization.

With the emergence of online communities this situation becomes more clear. Individuals are connected in a decentralized network and can become active just by having contact with content that appeals to their values. Sheldrake (cf. 2011: 23) defines this type of public as netizens, who are public for the simple fact that they are online and willing to act according to his sense of right and wrong and his sense of good and evil. But this description of Sheldrake is a reality that does not exist just on the online. Technology only allows this behaviour, which is part of the genetic code of any society, visible and accelerated in an unprecedented way. For the organization's legitimacy the public must be better integrated, even those who have no direct interest to the organization, but they are linked by common values. The closer to the centre the more they feel integrated. Only with sharing values we can have a proximity to the center – connection with the concept of "integral action" (Shils, 1992: 146).

On the other hand, when there is recognition. Is the legitimacy that guides the action and it is the origin of the authority of the centre. The action exists because individuals recognize the existence of a legitimate authority representing a recognized power. There are two types of legitimacy that distinguish a politically stable society built on an absolute authority, and a society that originates various authorities that are fighting each other in a public arena of meanings where the action occurs. The first sees the legitimacy raised to a higher level that transcends the will of man and is one that we can find in the United States that are based on a meta-social greatness. Furthermore, a second legitimacy, after the French Revolution, has its source of legitimacy in human reason, where men are not limited to contemplate an order that includes them, but are themselves creators of laws that yearn to see their will represented in a particular centre.

This second type of legitimacy is the legitimacy typically modern, based on a contractualist vision where the centre represents the will of men and it is legitimized in the image and will of them. In this way the idea is justified that the publics have a political action in the organization. Organizations are not only legitimized by their lawsuits and their legality, nor for their tradition. There is another dimension, which is where the Public Relations act – the legitimacy of the organization, making it charismatic. As long as it becomes further away from the centre, the organization becomes less charismatic to those who recognize certain quality in it.

Concerning the legitimate power, Weber (1979) states that there are three types of power – the traditional, the legal and the charismatic. The first is deeply rooted in social and unanimously behaviours. The second stems from the rules created and legislated (is the power of the law). Finally, charisma enters in the sphere of Public Relations as legitimizing action. This is a source of authority which comes from a transcendental quality manifested by a recognition and reliability of a set of extraordinary qualities. It is a power that exceeds the size of tradition and law, making the organization known for the ability to do extraordinary things that others cannot.

This vital element of charisma is essential for publics to recognize in the organization a 'license to operate' in a specific context. The action of Public Relations can be defined by continuous efforts to make an organization socially legitimate, making it charismatic. Public Relations is the political activity of an organization whose function is to legitimize it.

## 3. Organizations and their Publics: A Relation of Centre and Periphery

Publics are not just passive objects that the organization uses to value, but are themselves embedded in the organization, extending the boundaries of this centre and involving the participation on consensus about the same centre. Organizations are constituted by living publics, in the sense that they decide the fate of the life of the organization, directly or indirectly.

Recognizing each other by internalizing their attitudes is to recognize social cooperation, where the individual is aware not only of their obligations, but also of their legitimate rights (Honneth, 2011).

Organizations are characterized by integrated public and politically active – they exercise their influence directly or indirectly through the roles they play in various situations (Example: the consumer from a competitor affects us indirectly because being a part of our periphery is also being a part of another centre, playing different roles in both organizations).

> Effective communication will vary and depend on the recognition that individuals can create different meanings in particular contexts of time and space, and that their interpretations will necessarily differ (Gorjão, 2011: 26).

The role of Public Relations is exactly to seek consensus in conflict resolutions (because there is no society without conflict). Since the conflict itself already presupposes the implicit understanding between members of a social interaction, it's important to realize that any question of communication must also take into account the need to realize and understand opposite arguments. Therefore it establishes the idea that a society does not mean the absence of conflict, but the establishment of consensus and the dispute of interests and agreements among the citizens.

To understand the process of legitimizing an organization in an environment where conflict issues arise permanently, we need to move away from what is usually understood as internal and external to an organization. We do not intend to make this assumption in their material sense, but in the sense of the relationship between the organization and their publics. 'Finding the boundaries of organization has exercised a number of researchers. The 'hard shell' that may once have existed to define an organisation has gone' (Philips, 2009: 62). An organization is a chain of relationships that goes beyond the legal and financial dimensions. She is, by definition, intangible.

In our view, all publics are part of the organization, being integrated at different levels. What we propose is a separation between the organization as a social construction and the organization as their legal, economic or financial dimensions. While Public Relations, we now propose a concept of organization as a social construction and the kind of legitimacy that there emerges is direct responsibility of the communicative action.

Our proposal considers the organization as a set of relationships that orbit the centre that defines it. This happens from the fact that this centre exists inside a social context in which all elements are integrated. The same way Shils indicates that there are no disintegrated companies, since all presuppose a particular type of integration, in which expectations of their members are always dependent on their social position relative to the centre, the same thing can be said for an organization. We can not talk about internal and external organization because there is no state or a situation of disintegration – all are integrated what varies is their role in relation to the centre.

It's the relationship with the centre that defines how the members of the organization are integrated, either as employees customers, potential customers suppliers, customers, community, etc. – they are all part of the organization, standing closer to the centre or the periphery. Those in the periphery are themselves a part less integrated of the organization, but they are further integrated into another set of values than those ones of the organization. This set of values can form another centre, such as a competing organization, or just mean an opposition to these values which can aspire to an amendment.

## 4. A New Typology of Publics

In our opinion, the typologies often used to characterize the audiences are too much focused on socio-demographic issues, away from the elements that define the relationship of an individual with an organization: the values which he shares and recognizes in it. The "Publics of Grunig" is an example of the referred approaches.

We need a proactive approach, which comes from the particular case to the general one, and takes into account how to build the legitimacy of an organization. Organizations, while a set of relationships that form around a centre, cannot fail to consider all those who, even when not connected directly, influence those who are and those who can join if a certain subject become relevant. Consequently, we reject Grunig's (1984) notion of non-public, since all those who are integrated into a social system are, in fact, publics that assume different roles depending on the subject and context.

Consequently, we share the idea of Gorjão (2011) that the identification and characterization of audiences often used in Public Relations seems to have an excessively sociological connotation, since it studies the behaviour essentially through cultural or geographic variables, and that we should consider publics as social groups or communities, but particularly focusing on its specificities that make them diverge or converge. In this case, what bounds them together, even when there is not a direct relationship, are the values that they share with each other and that define an individual position on the legitimacy of a particular action. Subsequently then, the same group of individuals, formed from a socio-demographic criteria, may not be uniform in what is the most essential element in the relationship with the centre. A typology based on values and levels of proximity allows us to sidestep this limitation and build groups from what really defines the legitimacy that a person gives to another entity.

What we propose is a new approach. One less focused on the demographic categorization and more focused on the relationship that audiences have with the centre of the organization, an approach that seeks to see the group from the individual and not the individual from the group. What seems core to Public Relations is the relationship that an individual has with that centre. We are interested in knowing who are the key players and how we stand before the inevitability of conflicts. We can summarize this issue in the following question: what makes the centre of an organization legitimate in a given context?

We propose a typology to identify this on the different levels. A typology that is not sealed, that can only be framed in a particular context: where certain values are placed in confrontation.

The first level consists of those who are in direct contact with the centre. They are the ones that control and direct the organization behaviour. They make decisions that can change the centre itself and have direct power over it. At this level we can include the CEO of a company, shareholders with voting rights, directors, etc. They are all those who run the centre. We give them the name of managers (of the centre).

On a second level, we found all those who are part of the regular processes of the organization that participate actively in them. These can be employees, contractors or volunteers that collaborate in or with the organization. That is, those who, in a particular context, recognize the value that unites them to the centre strong enough to participate actively. The collaboration with the centre without having a direct power of decision is what defines this level. We give them the name of collaborators.

The third level is defined by all those who advocate the organization in public, but that do not collaborate directly in their processes. They take a public stance in defence of the organization. This is the case of opinion leaders or brand advocates. We will give them the name of defenders.

The fourth level is composed of all those who have a favourable opinion, but do not to express it. They have a qualitatively favourable opinion, but it's not strong enough to make a stand in defence of the organization. We can fit the vast majority of consumers in this level, which have an instrumental relation with a service or product. This is a level where legitimacy is not consolidated and we give it the name concordants.

The fifth level can be characterized as a level of absence. This is a level at which the relationship with the centre was not established for a particular situation or conflict. We can say that this is a level where a public is "asleep", that go to another level when coming into contact with the conflict of values. It is a level characterized by a "not at play" situation, for not being in contact with the conflict, but always have the possibility to do so and position itself on another level. This is a level where the legitimation does not occur, but also there is a decrease of legitimacy.

There is a momentary absence in the conflict on the part of the individual. We give them the name of absents. The sixth level is characterized by being the first level in which the audiences take a contrary position to the centre, they disagree with its values in a given context. This is the level at which the silent discordants. Those who do not assume a voice against, but which, to come into contact with the conflict, disagree with the organization. We call them "non-concordants". The seventh level brings together all those who, in addition to disagree, do express their opinion and make it public. Those, who do not recognize the legitimacy of the centre and act proactively to their delegitimization in the public space. We give them the name of accusers. Finally, the eighth level is composed of individuals who act in an organized manner against the centre. These are employees or directors of another centre, which can be a competitor, an activist group or another one that, in an organized manner, acts actively in order to counteract, dissolve or take the centre to its power. We give them the name of crusaders.

After identifying the degree of proximity to the centre of the different stakeholders, it is necessary to set the value(s) that define their legitimation and determines the "level" in which each individual falls.

This is an obvious need when we consider that two individuals, at the same level of legitimacy, may have totally different reasons. They can have different values that characterize an organization as legitimate. The question of the legitimacy and importance of the values do not always have the same relationship. It does not have to be instrumental, because the issue of Public Relations is not merely a matter of added value in the sense of a commercial interest, but a matter of recognizing that an organization has legitimacy in its actions by acting in accordance with a set of standards that an individual recognizes.

The identification of values that build the attitude of a public is important – the strongest values at a given time are those that will prevail, depending on the type of relationship that is defined in relation to the value. Comparing Public Relations to the manufacture of an object, without a uniquely human and legitimizing dimension, would be like understanding its practice as a reductive relationship with the centre.

Instead of B2B and B2C Business, maybe we should speak in terms of Business to Society, i.e., Public Relations helps to overcome the mere instrumental existence of an organization, making it socially legitimate. An organization does not have a single type of public, then we are recognized as legitimate when we are creating value for society as whole (and not merely in view of the organizational interests).

The Business to Society mind-set fits in terms of the network of relationships in which all stakeholders have an important role and does not exclude the economic interests of the organization. An organization only concerned with their economic interests will not be recognized as legitimate and will compromise its sustainability (hence, for example, the banking sector is interested in the promotion of Social Responsibility campaigns). Our job as Public Relations is to add a value, through the organization's legitimacy, which goes beyond the instrumental aspect of the relationship with the publics, and add a social value to its existence – people are willing to work, buy, etc., because it is the centre that is recognized by them as the more legitimate in a given context (people can change level depending on the value in dispute).

To build a common reality we have to overcome the instrumental interest – it is not realizing the benefit that we can take, but what it holds for me, as part of a 'we', a single social organism composed of relationships:

> …the role of Public Relations, exercised through the organizational actions and speeches, is to predispose markets to trade with the organization, valuing it in consciousness and feelings of the public, through their legitimacy (Porto Simões, 1995: 215).

Organizations need to position themselves in regard to the complex changes of society and therefore create communication structures that can make this link. Today organizations are what communicate. Investment in communication practices have become more and more important for the establishment of relations with all stakeholders, in particular through the conversations that allow the organization to express its identity and its values. Organizations look for communicative practices that synthesize information and not just to analyze.

## 5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this article is the idea that no one is disintegrated from the organization we are all part of it. We cannot reduce its boundaries to 'internal' and 'external' audiences, being that our proposal, at its core, the acceptance that each public can go trough varying degrees of connection to the centre, being closer or further away, but never on the outside (that is why different individuals assume different roles).

Public Relations, while a political function par excellence of the organization, allows the idea that communication is:

> The action and speech occur among men so far as that they are directed, and retain their ability to reveal the agent even when their content is exclusively 'object', returning to the world of things in which men move – world that stands between them and which carry their specific interests and goals. These

> interests are, in the most literal sense of the word, something interesting, which is among the people and, therefore, among their relations and connections (Arendt, 2001: 231).

Action is more than a mechanical process of communication. It is interpretive and evaluative par excellence, having a role in the creation of meanings, of both parties, which would otherwise be unintelligible: '(…) ability to trigger on himself the response behavior caused the other …' (Honneth, 2011: 102). It is social interaction that gives to choose multiple paths of action that allows someone to have conscience of his subjectivity.

Only in this way it is also possible to establish consensus and commitments between an organization and its stakeholders, Kelsen (2009: 173) states that this allows a '… Real approximation of unanimity required by the idea of freedom for the creation of social order…'

This subject of communicational effectiveness is connected to the issue of social relationship and the perception of rights and obligations of both parties – one can reason on the recognition of minorities or deep economic, social or geographical differences, whose assumptions need to be studied and planned by a Public Relations professional.

> What seems necessary isn't the reformulation of the model of Public Relations as negotiation and compromise, but rather support him in a communication concept that is both inclusive and representative of everyday practices (Eiró-Gomes, 2006: 13).

What seems to be indispensable is to think of Public Relations as a matter of legitimacy. It is a matter of integrating publics in the centre.

With this approach we have opened the way for further works in understand Public Relations as more than a simple management of relationships, but a practice that presents itself as the political guardian of the organization in relationship with its stakeholders. Only in this way it is possible to understand what is most core in a relationship between the centre and the periphery. At the same time, we present a new typology of publics, built from this new way to understand the discipline of Public Relations: an activity that aims to legitimize organizations.

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# A History of the Future

## Concepts for Telling the Story of Online PR

Philip Michael YOUNG

*Lund University, Sweden*

While it is undeniable that the proliferation of internet channels and platforms has brought many practical changes to the way the discipline of PR is executed, not everyone would agree that today “All Public Relations is online Public Relations”. Some would maintain that the changes are superficial, that the business and purpose of Public Relations is unaltered; those with a media relations focus will have to acknowledge significant changes in the structure of media industries, but might well choose not to recognize shifts in the traditional view that privileges independent (journalistic) platforms as key to the “third party endorsement” model. Certainly there remains a significant section of the academic community that feels no need to radically realign theory to reflect the paradigm shift proclaimed by the “digital evangelists”. No doubt these debates will rumble on, but a strong case can be made for arguing that the emergence of what some term *Web 2.0 technology* has been mirrored by a shift in the language of Public Relations. Here, the claim is that the discipline is increasingly articulating its purpose and culture through discourse associated with social media.

Concepts such as *transparency*, *authenticity*, *conversation* and *engagement* are inextricably linked with the mainstreaming of social media practice; although their usage is not unique to social media (and predate much of the opening up of platforms and channels seen over the last two decades), their meanings have to a significant degree been negotiated across social media fora. In this process, many of the commentators who maintain blogs with a Public Relations focus, have developed a lexus that reinforces this progression.

Last year, the UK’s Chartered Institute of Public Relations chose to publish *Share This: The Social Media Handbook for PR Professionals* (2012, edited by Stephen Waddington), in which some of the brightest names among the ever-growing band of digital specialists strive to bring latest thinking to a mainstream market.

This paper suggests the process by which practitioners have absorbed and utilized the terminology of social media is part of an evolution of the discipline itself. It does not seek to explore links between the texts of social media evangelists and changes in practice, as investigation of the diffusion of ideas is well beyond its scope. It does, however, argue that there are links between the language of digital evangelism and the way that even the digital conservatives and skeptics conceptualize their discipline. It is not unreasonable to take this forward to saying that the change in language reveals a deeper change in the core nature of Public Relations practice. Part of the justification for this claim lies in the belief that Public Relations agencies are finding it necessary to use the language of social media in the ongoing struggle with competing disciplines. The ability to engage in dialogue with stakeholders has been an important tool for those trying to claim space (and budget) for Public Relations, not only from marketing and advertising but also from customer services and human resources, and it made a great deal of sense for PR to claim the language of conversation as its preserve.

Although it would be extremely difficult to trace and identify a robust connection between the work of commentators discussing the conceptual changes that might be reflected in Public Relations practice, it is hard not to acknowledge that the work of thinkers including Brian Solis and Steve Rubel has influenced thinking (not least in the approach of Edelman, which is positioned as one of the agencies with a higher degree of engagement with social media and internet-driven approached (and is the employer of Rubel)). Likewise, the tone of discussion was has undoubtedly been influenced by *Naked Conversations*, by Scoble and Israel (2006) and *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (http://www.cluetrain.com/, 1999), not least in the articulation of the “markets as conversations” paradigm.

Finally, when one of the defining characteristics of internet-mediated communication is reach, and the disappearance of geographical distance as a limiting factor in the dissemination of information, it must be acknowledged from the outset that it is difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions from a study that is rooted in English language discourse, and has a strong UK focus.

With these caveats in place, this paper will go on to suggest a broad framework for a possible study into the conceptual history of online Public Relations which draws strongly on the writings of PR bloggers.

## Technological change

Broadly, the study period might coincide with the emergence of the term *Web 2.0*, first used in January 1999 by Darcy DiNucci, an article entitled "*Fragmented Future*", and most easily understood as the "writable web." The broader usage of the Web 2.0 was encouraged by Tim O'Reilly, when O'Reilly Media and MediaLive hosted the first Web 2.0 conference in 2004. As well as handily describing the emergence of blogging platforms that allowed online publishing without needing technical skills, (to be more fully realized by Facebook) the terminology was part description, and part marketing device; the process of identifying emerging trends and articulating them with buzzwords is, of course, central to the commercial development of social media innovation.

The late 20th century saw the beginnings of a significant change in the way people ***receive*** information, and from 2000 onwards, the emergence of these Web 2.0 platforms and social networks, bringing about a radical change in the way people *exchange* information; Phillips and Young (2009) refer to this as a 90 degree flipping in the *vector of communication*.

The last 20 years or so have also seen a radical change in the way people *find* information, with the emergence of search, and to a lesser extent, social bookmarking and peer recommendation. To an extent anyone who seeks to find information on the Internet is having their view of the world molded by algorithms (and perhaps finding themselves trapped in a *Filter Bubble* (Pariser)).

The proliferation of channels, and negligible cost of Internet mediated transactions, has impacted significantly on a wide range of business models, from the music industry (iTunes) to the seismic contractions in newspaper sales across most Western countries. It is possible to argue that Public Relations was slow to respond to opportunities of contracting news staffs (see Davies, *Flat Earth News*, 2008, for a critical exposition of PR-driven news production he demonizes as *churnalism*) and also slow to exploit *brand journalism* – perhaps because years of bruising encounters had made some in PR fearful of claiming territory defined by the objectivity paradigm of traditional journalism.

Certainly, the fate of media relations is much discussed on PR blogs, from Tom Foremski's incendiary 2006 posting *Die, Press Release Die! Die! Die!* (http://www.siliconvalleywatcher.com/mt/archives/2006/02/die_press_relea.php, to considered analysis of the way in which technology is seen to be killing the business model of (print) newspapers and magazines, to changes in engagement and access that are realigning notions of the role of gatekeeping; that sports stars and celebrities can now communicate directly with fans is worthy of serious discussion.

Sharing is seen as good, but any historical reading will describe a discipline that found many elements of Web 2.0 profoundly disturbing, not least in its challenge to its *command and control*, gatekeeping function. Much of the discourse on blogs contained ascerbic assertions that, despite the claims of PR, organizations never did control their own messages; in many cases this was a revelation only apparent in hindsight, and a significant proportion of the evangelists discovered that they themselves were not totally comfortable with letting go.

The production *user-generated content*, or as academics might have it *co-creation*, has been fuelled by the development of ever more accessible technologies, but the Public Relations discipline has found this, too, to be a double-edged sword. Despite being considered by some evangelists to have a strong potential, *wikis* have not really moved into the mainstream (except of course Wikipedia); image sharing, on the other hand, certainly has gone mainstream, through Flickr and YouTube, and later Instagram and Pinterest. Note that Wikipedia entries, which form an important element of organizational reputation, can legitimately be regarded as conversations, certainly as negotiations – and are often ill-natured and decidedly unsocial. They are also examples of conversations taking place very much outside or around the organization itself, as there is a strong taboo against organization participating directly in the conversation: We are talking about you, not to you!

To sum up, any conceptual history has to have technological innovation as part of its spine, but the software innovations that produced sharing platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, were not inspired by the Public Relations discipline.

## Discourse change

The language of social media and social network is necessarily soft, and heavily influenced by the framing by Facebook of contacts as *Friends* and approval ratings as *Likes*.

Much language resonates with the notion of sociability, with an emphasis on sharing, comment and dialogue. Clearly there are business advantages to sharing, which promotes and encourages the continued and expanded use of network based services, and can contribute to search engine optimization. As well as being a seen as a positive brand value, “social” is promoted by some as an emerging business model.

There is a shift towards language that somehow conveys authenticity, and away from the language of organizations. Likes and comments are framed within the broad area of engagement, which is again a familiar organizational value, and have more personal implications than the more formal, less colloquial usages such as “feedback” etc.

As communication advisers seek to steer organizations towards more social language, it is at least possible to see this in terms of move from situational analysis of Grunigian application of systems theory and to terminology that resonates more harmoniously with the lexus of interpersonal relationships.

If we are to accept "markets as conversations" it is undeniably the case that such conversations were harder to capture before the advent of digital technologies than they are today. Any history of the concepts informing online Public Relations will be much concerned with the aggregation of ideas and opinions into reputation that is made visibly manifest by social networks, social bookmarking, and by search engines, such as Google (also Instagram, YouTube and Facebook).

## What sort of words, and what are the implications of employing the new vocabulary?

On the back cover of the hardback first edition, *Share This* claims to be "a practical handbook for the biggest changes in the media and its professions. It has been created by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Social Media Panel and was written in the cloud using many of the social techniques that it addresses."

Note that the authors, or those involved in promoting the book, take it as read that the biggest changes involve social media, and are comfortable referring to "the cloud", a concept that has only recently gained what popular currency it may enjoy.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Ch. 1 Katy Howell, Intro to Social Networks** | | | |
| 10 pages, body text includes | | | |
| *Social* | 54 | *Network/s/ing/ers* | 41 |
| *Share/ing/able* | 15 | *Conversation/s* | 17 |
| *Friends* | 3 | *Connecting/ion/ed* | 12 |
| | | | |
| **Ch. 2 Simon Sanders, Kickstart your Social Media Strategy** | | | |
| 8 pages, body text includes | | | |
| *Social* | 34 | *Engage* | 8 |
| *Conversation* | 3 | | |
| | | | |
| **Ch. 4 Helen Nowicka, Integrating Traditional and Social Media** | | | |
| 8 pages, body text includes | | | |
| *Social* | 15 | *Share* | 2 |

*Share This* editor Stephen Waddington co-wrote *Brand Anarchy* with Steve Earl, and will publish *Brand Vandalism* later this year (2013).

Although not explicitly a book about social media, analysis of a near-to-final draft of *Brand Vandalism* contains 292 mentions of *social* in its 123 pages, *conversations* 119; *engage/ment* 169; *transparency* 39; save 73; *Facebook* 73: and *network* 93.

Presciently, the groundbreaking first edition of *Online Public Relations*, by David Phillips (Kogan Page, 2000) includes 123 mentions of *network*, 75 of *share*, 68 of *transparency*, 38 of *social*, 25 of *engage* and 21 of *conversation*.

## How PR articulates its activity

A useful contribution to the literature of explanation is *What is Social Media?*, an e-book by Antony Mayfield, published by Spannerworks: Search Engine Marketing (www.spannerworks.com/ebooks) on September 25, 2006.

Social media is best understood as a group of new kinds of online media which share most or all of the following characteristics:

- **Participation:** social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between the concept of media and audience.
- **Openness:** most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, feedback, comments and sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content – password protected content is frowned on.
- **Conversation:** whereas traditional media is about “broadcast”, content transmitted or distributed to an audience, social media is better seen as conversational, twoway.
- **Community:** social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively around common interests – be that a love of photography, a political issue or a favorite TV show.
- **Connectedness:** Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, via links and combining different kinds of media in one place.

## Conferences and events

(The following section is highly selective and for illustrative purposes only. It includes mention of events in which the author had direct connections).

Just as the term Web 2.0 gained wider currency through the O’Reilly Media event in 2004, conferences, industry or academic, have played a role in defining some f the key terminology. That same July, commentators came together online for the first Global PR Blog Week.

"We want to showcase blogging to help our colleagues and clients understand the value of blogging as a fast, low cost and highly-effective publishing, marketing and content management tool," said (Trevor) Cook, director of the Sydney-based Public Relations firm Jackson Wells Morris. "With top blogs reaching millions of people daily, and directly influencing journalists and decision-makers, thousands of whom also blog, it is time for blogging to be taken seriously in the marketing mix."

http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/global-pr-blog-week-10-event-set-for-july-12---16th-2004-75076837.html.

One of the first academic conferences to focus specifically on this area was Euprera's EuroBlog Symposium, held in Stuttgart, Germany in March 2006. The Call for papers invited researchers to present empirical findings, theoretical insights or case studies … that combine Public Relations theory or communication/marketing theory and social software or focus on an international perspective.

> The Stuttgart symposium will bring together researchers from all over Europe to explore the challenges and chances of truly interactive technologies characterizing the 'google world', including weblogs, podcasts, wikis, real simple syndication, folksomonies, social tagging, personal networks and other types of social software and services. It expands the insights of EuroBlog 2006, a quantitative survey on the usage of Weblogs by European PR professionals whose results will be published in early 2006. http://publicsphere.typepad.com/mediations/2005/12/call_for_papers.html

This announcement appears to be one of the earliest uses of the term "social software" in the academic discourse.

For my presentation to the Stuttgart Symposium I tried to interpret the results of EuroBlog 2006 in relation to the claims made for weblogs and social software by 'evangelists' such as *Naked Conversationalists* Scoble and Israel. I also highlighted two key findings which suggest European PR practitioners were either not aware of or had so far rejected two of the features that evangelists claim will have the most impact on PR practice.

- Only 7.1 pc saw **communicating directly with stakeholders** (bypassing journalists) as most important, with a further 14.5 saying very important; 23.3 pc undecided and 55.2 said not very important or least important.
- And one in three (32 pc) rated the **ability to track conversations** about their own products and services as the ***least important*** reason for engaging with the blogosphere http://publicsphere.typepad.com/mediations/2006/03/for_my_presenta.html

## The discipline responds

Looking at the landing pages of the top ten agencies listed in PR Weeks Top 150 gives a picture that both supports and to some extent undermines the preceding argument. Interestingly, although "social media" and "conversations" are not part of the headline package for some of the biggest agencies, the words "Public Relations" are even less prominent.

| **PR Week Top 150 (http://www.prweek.com/uk/wide/1187972/Top-150-table-2013/)** | |
|---|---|
| 1. Brunswick<br>http://www.brunswickgroup.com/index.aspx<br>accessed 8 July 2013 | One explicit mention of social media, except News item A Cyberspace Odyssey: From Live Streaming to fugitive hunting on American streets, social media now dominate the public *conversation* |
| 2. Edelman | Link to 2013 Global Entertainment Study<br>Entertainment is changing. Around the world people want an immersive and interactive entertainment experience, with the emerging markets leading the field.<br>People are as likely to socialize about the entertainment as they are about their personal lives<br>Online entertainment creates global link… so brands can use visual storytelling to connect with the world on a deeper |
| 3. Weber Shandwick<br>http://webershandwick.co.uk/#!/about/welcome | Welcome to the Engagement era<br>This is the era of engagement. New to some, but not to us. While it's an uncertain time for many brands, companies and organizations, it's one we're very familiar with: engaging audiences is what we've done since the beginning. When you engage, you converse. When you engage, you inspire advocates. When you engage, you create movements.<br>It's actually what we've always done. And always will. |
| 4. FTI Consulting<br>http://www.fticonsulting.com | Format projects no content relevant to study |
| 5. Bell PottingerPrivate<br>http://www.bell-pottinger.co.uk/ | Panel link: Digital Communications. From social strategy to technical development.<br>Lead story: The word 'digital' means many things to many people, but there's no need to complicate it with jargon. Fundamentally the web is a channel that presents clients with fantastic opportunities. It's highly targeted, highly measurable and, providing clients get good consultancy, can be highly successful. (http://www.bell-pottinger.co.uk/digital) |
| 6. Freud Communications<br>http://www.freud.com/ | Format projects no content relevant to study |

| **PR Week Top 150 (http://www.prweek.com/uk/wide/1187972/Top-150-table-2013/)** | |
|---|---|
| 7. Hill & Knowlton Strategies | About us page includes Because the public is no longer bound by geographic borders or limited by language or culture, disintermediation is the norm. The old filters and boundaries no longer apply. http://www.hkstrategies.com/company/sustainability/about-us<br>Services page: There's a lot of smoke-and-mirrors in the digital space, with everyone focused on the latest tool, gadget and platform. H+K Strategies' Digital team brings clarity to the digital space and focuses on the offline results that drive your business. H+K Digital is a full-service global agency serving the world's largest brands and the most targeted local campaigns. http://www.hkstrategies.com/expertise/services |
| 8. RLM Finsbury http://rlmfinsbury.com | Format projects no content relevant to study |
| 9. MSL Group http://www.mslgroup.com/ | Who we are panel: MSL Group is Publicis Groupe's strategic communications and engagement company. We are trusted advisors and storytellers for the conversation age |
| 10. Ketchum Pleon http://www.ketchum.com/ | Format projects no content relevant to study |

## PR Weblogs: A suggested study sample

According to a list published on the New PR wiki (http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php?pagename=Resources.PRBloggingTimeline, accessed July 15, 2013) the first weblog with a PR focus was August 3, 2001: Phil Gomes, Phil's Blogservations – http://www.philgomes.com/blog/, followed by November 5, 2001: Jeneane Sessum, Allied – http://allied.blogspot.com/. Sixteen followed in 2003, and 20 more in 2004. A sample for a UK-orientated study could include Neville Hobson (initially *Nevon*, http://www.nevon.net/ from December 2002, now http://www.nevillehobson.com), Stuart Bruce, *A PR Guru's Musings* (http://www.20six.co.uk/stuartbruce/, from July 2003, now *A PR Guy's Musings*, http://stuartbruce.biz/) and Richard Bailey (PR Studies, http://prstudies.typepad.com/weblog/ August 2003. A later entrant, worthy of inclusion, would be Heather Yaxley's Green Banana (http://greenbanana.wordpress.com); Yaxley is also heavily involved in *PR Conversations*.

Each of these blogs is by a commentator with a serious interest in commercial and social implications of online communications, combining understanding of practice with an awareness of academic discourse.